

DINING

The Grub Hunter: Developing a menu for a restaurant a delicious break from construction



An artist's depiction of Jacks Monterey in the atrium at Portola Hotel & Spa. Contributed

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Chef Danny Abruzzese has opened 15 restaurants in his career. Contributed

When it comes to opening a new restaurant, menu development is a delicious respite from the hair-pulling, forehead-slapping, tedious business side of things.

This becomes obvious as the Jacks Monterey restaurant management team gathers giddily around an oblong table groaning with plates of food up for digestion and debate. Being invited to this midday soiree inside Portola Hotel & Spa provides me insight into how to orchestrate a new menu. Everything is evaluated, from taste and texture to plating and portion size. The team discusses garnishes, where to source avocado leaf, whether the menu should annotate “chow chow,” the wonders of monkey bread, the need to use local Monterey jack in the mac ‘n’ cheese, and how the vibrant color of wild salmon pops against white plates.

Then we eat. And eat. Executive chef Danny Abruzzese — who has helped open 15 restaurants over his long career — can barely contain his enthusiasm as he presents several proposed menu items for the spring reincarnation of Jacks.

“This is what I do,” said Abruzzese, who has worked at many of the premier properties along the Central Coast, including Highlands Inn, Quail Lodge, Asilomar Conference Grounds, and Monterey Peninsula Country Club. “I’m really excited to do my food with all the great local ingredients out there.”

The Jacks team calls it California Cultural Cuisine, using locally sourced produce and other products native to Monterey County, along with sustainable seafood. Abruzzese has created a veritable cultural stew — Greek-influenced braised goat moussaka, Italian-inspired gnocchi,

pizza and manicotti, Asian sauces for seafood, New Orleans-style shrimp and grits, lamb with Argentine chimichurri. And on and on.

“Serenaded” by power saws and hammers next door as the new Jacks comes to life, we gather inside the dated, clubby former Jacks space, which will eventually be spruced up and used for banquets and special events.

“Pardon our dust” doesn’t begin to excuse the shroud of construction chaos that’s descended over Portola guests.

The new Monterey Conference Center adjacent to the hotel has taken on \$60 million in renovations, effectively choking off business and natural traffic flow. At the same time the hotel went all in on its own \$6 million construction project, renovating the lobby and creating its new restaurant called Jacks Monterey — jutting out from the former Jacks Lounge and extending the footprint into the hotel’s ficus-tree-lined atrium.

Portola GM Janine Chicourrat walks me through the raw construction zone and somehow sees it all clearly — natural light, clean lines, open design, contemporary decor, teak wood. She describes a fun yet sophisticated setting, with romantic nighttime lamp lighting in the branches of those famous trees, and a sleek bar serving craft cocktails, tap wine, and draft beer from adjacent Peter B’s Brewpub.

The target date for opening is the end of April. Chicourrat promises “one of the prime gathering places at the hotel and our downtown Monterey neighborhood,” a place where locals can claim “ownership” alongside visitors.

“We want it to be an environment where locals feel welcomed and valued,” said food and beverage manager Brian Hein, who confirmed the hotel will continue to provide free validated parking (valet or self-park).

Affordability is a prime concern, and Hein said most dinner items will be priced below \$20 — unless you upgrade to a shared plate (not quite double the price). For example, you can order Alaskan halibut with porcinis, baby leeks and Champagne butter for \$18, or share a larger plate with friends for \$34.

As for the aforementioned mac ‘n’ cheese, you can’t have a restaurant named Jacks Monterey without some credible cheese. So the restaurant has partnered with Schoch Family Farmstead in Salinas, creating a decadent Jack ‘n’ Cheese Bake using a rugged, robust, dry Jack made from fresh raw milk. Happy cows, happy diners.

AUBERGINE MORE ACCESSIBLE THAN YOU THINK

You may think the only way to dine at Aubergine at L’Auberge Carmel is to siphon off your 401(k) or give up double lattes for a year. The truth is our finest of fine dining restaurants holds great value for the experience.

And now you can gain entry into executive chef Justin Cogley’s food through his bar menu.

You read that correctly. Not only does Aubergine have an actual bar (a tiny, kitschy, moveable one standing in for a proper bar to be constructed soon), but Cogley is rolling out a bar menu that takes our favorites to new heights.

Cogley's always-changing, eight-course tasting menu checks in at \$150 per person, celebrating the seasons and their rich bounty. You're in good hands here. Cogley has been nominated for Best Chef by the James Beard Foundation, won Best New Chef by Food & Wine magazine and awarded the prestigious title of Grand Chef Relais & Châteaux.

If you just want to stick your toe in the water here, enjoy a fireside seat in the lounge and dive into the bar menu, currently served weekends from 6-9 p.m. Last weekend we tried Cogley's take on a lobster roll, succulent chunks of poached lobster tucked inside a slice of buttery brioche. He's also served an open-faced shrimp California toast, inspired by shrimp Louie with mashed avocado on buttery bread. And Cogley's take on steak frites is an unadorned and hearty meal. The bar menu changes weekly, each plate is in the \$20-\$30 range, and the food pairs nicely with sommelier Sean Appel's take on craft cocktails.

Another way to experience Aubergine is to take one of Cogley's interactive classes. Tuesday, March 7 brings his take on brunches and bloody Mary's, and the following night is another installment in his ongoing Redefining Flavor Dinner series. This series pairs Cogley's amazing food with Aubergine's award-winning service but in a more condensed time frame — and a more palatable price (\$115; four courses plus wine pairings). Disclaimer: Everyone sits at 6 p.m.

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